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ABSTRACT

Utilizing selected responses from the 1969 University Study Census (USC), perceptions of 488 black undergraduates enrolled at the University of Maryland in Fall, 1969 were obtained and evaluated. The degree to which these students perceived the students-university communication structure as being good or bad was determined. Results indicate that black freshmen perceived the communication structure more positively than seniors, and blacks with low grades felt more positively than blacks with high grades. No significant differences were found in the perceptions of black males and black females. Explanations for the results include the possibility that because of the nature of the white university structure there was little black participation in social events, advice seeking, and contact with those in authority. This factor may have altered the perceptions of seniors compared to freshmen. It is possible that blacks in an "asking position" in terms of money or academic aid may be less likely to criticize the university. Survey questions and charts showing responses are included. (Author/SW)

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DIFFERENCES IN BLACK STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF THE COMMUNICATION STRUCTURE IN A PREDOMINANTLY WHITE UNIVERSITY

Peter W. Van Arsdale, William E. Sedlacek
and Glenwood C. Brooks, Jr.

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SUMMARY

Utilizing selected responses from the 1969 University Student Census (USC), certain perceptions of 488 black undergraduates enrolled at the University of Maryland in Fall, 1969 were obtained and evaluated. Specifically, the degree to which these students perceived the student-university communication structure as being good or bad was determined.

Results indicated that black freshmen perceived the communication structure more positively than seniors, and blacks with low grades felt more positively than blacks with high grades. No significant differences were found in the perceptions of black males and black females. Explanations for the results included the possibility that because of the nature of the white University structure there was little black participation in social events, advice seeking, and contact with those in authority. This may have altered the perceptions of seniors compared to freshmen. The possibility that blacks in an "asking position" in terms of money or academic aid may be less likely to criticize the University was discussed.

Other results were compared to previous research, and it was suggested that a series of studies be conducted on black perceptions of communication structures so that specific changes could be recommended.

Black students are becoming a well-established segment of an increasing number of major university communities throughout the United States. Yet as Bradley points out,[1] in those institutions where blacks still comprise only a small percentage of the student population, they are constantly confronted with subtle (as well as direct) situations where prejudice and racism occur. This hinders their academic experience.

Whether it is the potential for such occurrences forcing these students to remain constantly alert, or a lack of actual acceptance of blacks by other members of the university community as Bradley also suggests, it may be that differential black-white communication patterns contribute to the problems black students encounter. This entire pattern of formal and informal communication between students, faculty, counselors, and administrators is termed the "student-university communication structure," and is the subject of this investigation.

Many studies have been directed toward the general problem of communication within the university community, among these being the investigations reported by Katz, Adelson, and McKeachie.[2]

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[1] Noland E. Bradley, "The Negro Undergraduate Student: Factors Relative to Performance in Predominantly White State Colleges and Universities in Tennessee," Journal of Negro Education, XXXVI (1967, No. 1), 15-23.

[2] In The American College, ed. Nevitt Sanford (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1962. References cited here include Joseph Katz, "Personality and Interpersonal Relations in the College Classroom," pp. 365-395; Joseph Adelson, "The Teacher as Model," pp. 396-417; W.J. McKeachie, "Procedures and Techniques of Teaching: A Survey of Experimental Studies," pp. 312-364.

While placing the burden of guilt for most communication difficulties on professors, none of these researchers dealt specifically with black students at predominantly white institutions. Bressler noted that there is a general lack of literature and demonstrable knowledge in this regard.[3] In order to properly evaluate a complex university communication structure as it affects blacks, black viewpoints on the structure must be obtained and assessed. This is particularly important where they comprise only a small percentage of the total undergraduate population (less than 3% at the University of Maryland). It is to this end that the present study is directed.

Rather than follow the more usual procedure of comparing black students with white students, as if they were in some unending competition to determine who is superior, it was decided to assess only the attitudes of blacks toward the University of Maryland communication structure. Banks states that the upsurge in black pride and ethnic togetherness is part of an increasingly successful attempt to establish a different cultural reference group against which black Americans can measure themselves.[4] In taking this fact into consideration, the present study compares the attitudes of black males with those of black females, black freshmen with black seniors, and blacks with high grades with those black undergraduates who are low

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[3]Marvin Bressler, "White Colleges and Negro Higher Education," Journal of Negro Education, XXXVI (1967, No.3), 258-265.

[4]William M. Banks, "The Changing Attitudes of Black Students," Personnel and Guidance Journal, ILVIII (1970, No.9). 739-745.

in academic standing.

The major responsibility for initiating and developing adequate black student-university communication processes rests with counselors, faculty, and administrators.[5] That there are at least two parties to any communication is obvious, yet none of the research reviewed presented statistical data which indicated the viewpoints of black students on this matter. The purpose of this study was to examine black viewpoints and attitudes toward the communications structure at the University of Maryland.

HYPOTHESES

Using the black student subgroups described above (males and females, freshmen and seniors, and academically high and low students), one primary and three secondary hypotheses were derived.

> PRIMARY HYPOTHESIS: Significant differences exist in the way in which different black sub-groups perceive the communication structure at the University of Maryland, as measured by a selected set of questionnaire responses. HYPOTHESIS A: Females perceive the student-university communication structure as being "better" than do males. HYPOTHESIS B: Freshmen perceive the student-university communication structure as being "better" than do seniors. HYPOTHESIS C: Academically high students perceive the student-university communication structure as being "better" than do academically low students.

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[5]See Samuel A. Proctor, "Reversing the Spiral Toward Futility," pp. 707-712; and Bennetta B. Washington, "Perceptions and Possibilities," pp. 757-761. In Personnel and Guidance Journal, ILVIII (1970, No.9)

The exact usage of the terms "good", "bad", and "better" in reference to the perceived nature of the communication structure must be explained. Clark and Plotkin found that there were more black women students than men, that the women earned higher grades, and they they tended to complete college more frequently.[6] Although their sample was restricted to students who had had contact with the National Scholarship Service and Fund for Negro Students, research by Van Arsdale, Sedlacek, and Brooks indicated that the mothers of black students tended to complete college more often than fathers.[7]

These findings, in combination with this statement by Clark and Plotkin:

> There is strong evidence that the least successful academic group is less enthusiastic about the favorable aspects of college than the better academic groups and readier to report instances of discrimination. (p. 9)

aided the formulation of Hypothesis A. The assumption was made that the favorable aspects of college studied by Clark and Plotkin might be extended to include an efficient communication structure, as perceived by the students themselves. Banks lends further indirect support to this hypothesis (see foot note 4). He found that black male students in particular were becoming much more negative in their perception of the white majority, which presumably might well include the administrative personnel and faculty of predominantly white universities.

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[6]Kenneth B. Clark and Lawrence Plotkin, The Negro Student at Intergrated Colleges (New York: National Scholarship Service and Fund for Negro Students, 1963).

[7]Peter W. Van Arsdale, William E. Sedlacek, and Glenwood C. Brooks, Jr., "Characteristics of Black Undergraduate Students at the University of Maryland, College Park, 1969-70," University of Maryland Cultural Study Center Research Report #2-70 (1970).

It should be noted, however, that the three studies just cited make no mention of specific criteria which delineate a good communication structure from a structure perceived by blacks as being bad. This determination is primarily a function of the questionnaire items used in the present study and in this sense is limited.

Prior research aiding in the formulation of Hypothesis B was also of an indirectly related nature. Vontress stressed the importance of communication skills for new or prospective black students in particular.[8] Although this does not mean that such students will always have such skills, it might be presumed that many blacks who do become freshmen at predominantly white universities are fairly efficient communicators, or believe that they can be.

Extending this line of reasoning, it was hypothesized that freshmen tend to perceive the communication structure as being better than do seniors, not because of past experiences but rather because of their optimism owing to a lack of college experience. Freshmen have not yet had to contend with the frustrations of student-university communication that black seniors presumably have experienced. Although there is evidence that frequent contacts between ethnic groups do produce changes in attitudes, prejudice is usually only reduced (and communication enhanced) when conditions under which contact occurs are "favorable", e.g. both blacks and whites

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[8]Clemmont E. Vontress, "Counseling Negro Students for College," Journal of Negro Education, XXXVII (1968, No. 1), 37-44

[9]Yehuda Amir, "Contact Hypothesis in Ethnic Relations,". Psychological Bulletin, LXXI (1969, No. 5), 319-342

are of equal status, both groups interact in functionally important activities, and contacts are of an informal or social nature.[9] Seniors may find that such is rarely the case in predominantly white institutions.

In formulating Hypothesis C, direct evidence specifically relating academic success (as measured by cumulative grade point average) and perceptions of the student-university communication structure was again found to be lacking. In hypothesizing that academically high students perceive the structure as being better than do academically low blacks, we were guided by essentially the same reasoning put forth for the first two hypotheses. Clark and Plotkin's finding that less successful academic groups are less enthusiastic about the favorable aspects of college than are the better academic groups, combined with Amir's summary concerning what constitutes favorable contact or communication conditions, led to the hypothesis that academically successful blacks have encountered more favorable communication situations. Hence, they would perceive the communication structure as being better.

METHOD

Subjects: The subjects for this study were black undergraduates who completed the 1969 University Student Census (USC) and who were enrolled at the University of Maryland during the Fall, 1969 semester. The USC is an attitude and activities inventory administered to all undergraduates. Since selected USC items were used in order to determine the percieved nature of the communication structure, Ss consisted of all those black students who completed the USC. As of September,

1969 there were 588 black undergraduates enrolled at the University, and of this number 488 (83%) completed the USC.

Procedure: Thirteen questions from the USC were judged by the writers to be indicators of various aspects of the student-university communication structure. (see Table 1)

Because of the multiple choice nature of the response alternatives, eight of the 13 items dealing with communication were used on both the "perceived-as-good" and "perceived-as-bad" scales. Since only one response was permitted to any question, and since each student was judged on both scales, this overlap eliminated any possibility that a student ranking high on the perceived-as-good scale would also rank high on the perceived-as-bad scale, or vice-versa. Ultimately 11 item responses were judged as indicative of good communication and 11 indicative of bad communication structure.

RESULTS

The results are presented in Figure 1 for males and females, in Figure 2 for freshmen and seniors, and in Figure 3 for academically high and academically low students. The median test, was used to determine if there was a significant ($p < .01$) difference between the medians of the two student sub-groups represented in each Figure.[10]

The percentages of those students responding to each possible number of perceived-as-good response alternatives (0-11) are graphed

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[10]Sidney Siegel, Nonparametric Statistics for the Behavioral Sciences (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1956), pp. 111-115.

in each case. Percentages, rather than the number of students, were graphed in order to facilitate the comparison of distributions representing unequal numbers of students, such as is the case in Figure 2. The number of students represented by the data points on the graphs are included for the benefit of the reader.

Of the 488 Ss studied, the breakdowns for the paired subgroups were as follows:

Males = 243	Females = 245
Freshmen = 211	Seniors = 55
Academically High = 119	Academically Low = 119

In the academic comparison, the upper quartile of all black Ss was deemed "academically high", and the lower quartile was deemed "academically low".[11]

Of the six comparisons presented in Figures 1, 2, and 3, two show significant differences between medians ($p < .01$); Figures 2B and 3B. Figure 2B shows that seniors perceived the communication structure as being significantly worse than did freshmen. Figure 3B shows that academically high students perceived the structure as being significantly worse than did academically low students.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study can perhaps be explained in the part by

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[11]Cumulative Grade Point Average (G.P.A.'s) were available for 476 of the 488 Ss. The lower cutoff for the academically high students was 2.24 on a 4.00 maximum scale, with the upper cutoff for the academically low students being 1.46. Cumulative G.P.A.'s ranged from 0.00 to 3.71.

synthesizing selected research from two fields, neither of which provides a sufficient explanation by itself. The field of interpersonal communication processes is the first of these. Research here sheds light on the specific variables at work when persons interact although it does not focus on blacks in university settings. The second field is that of black education, which while indicating many of the problems faced by blacks in predominantly white universities, says little about these students' perceptions of the student-university communication structure.

In the present study the communication structure is defined and delineated by the USC questions listed in Table 1. According to these criteria, seniors perceived the structure as being significantly worse than did freshmen (Figure 2B). One may assume that the difference lies in the fact that the seniors had been on campus for several years, whereas the freshmen had been there but a few days. Carrying this one step further, one might be tempted to conclude that because the seniors had experienced the intricacies of communication with faculty, counselors, and administrators, their perceptions were much more accurate. This however, is likely an over simplification of the situation, and of little help in explaining these results.

Extrapolating from the work done by Eisenstadt on the communication receptivity of Israeli immigrants, [12] the present writers point to the possibility that seniors may have lost a portion of their communication capacity. The predominantly white university

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[12]Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, "Conditions of Communication Receptivity," Public Opinion Quarterly, XVII (1953), 363-374.

structure may inadvertently have created situations which result in little black participation in social events, advice-seeking, and contact with those whites in positions of authority. That is, the longer a black student attends such a university, the more likely it is that a barrier will be created between him and the university, thus hindering the ability of the students to accurately (or perhaps too accurately?) perceive the nature of the communication structure.

Such a conclusion is supported by the work of Mehling[13] who found that communications are often logically distorted so that the conclusions persons derive from them better conform to what they perceive to be the "general atmosphere" of the communication. If their experience on campus has given black seniors the feeling that the general atmosphere is bad, even favorable communications from administrators might be perceived in a bad light.

Further support is found in a series of statements made by Katz.[14] After pointing out that limitations in personal experience impair communication, he states that there is a tendency to use stereotypes to fill in for these gaps in experience. Applying these findings to the present discussion, it can be seen that communication would be adversely affected by the unintentional use of "white administrator" and "black student" stereotypes by black students and white administrators, respectively.

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[13]Reuben Mehling, "A Study of Non-logical Factors of Reasoning in the Communication Process," Journal of Communication, IX (1959), 118-126.

[14]Daniel Katz, "Psychological Barriers to Communication," Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, CCL (1947), 17-25.

Although neither freshmen nor seniors perceived the student-university communication structure as being particularly good (Figure 2A), the present findings refute only part of the reasoning which went into the formulation of Hypothesis B. Apparently black freshmen are not particularly optimistic about their chances for effective communication with university personnel; contrary to the hypothesis. The necessary conditions for "favorable" contact derived from Amir's research would still seem to apply. In order to fully accept the explanation given here more research, including perceptions of white students, should be done. Academically high students were found to perceive the communication structure as being significantly worse than did academically low students (Figure 3B). As was the case for freshmen and seniors, neither group perceived the structure as being particularly good (Figure 3A), but in this study Hypothesis C was entirely refuted. This result does not agree with Clark and Plotkin's finding that less successful academic groups are less enthusiastic about the favorable aspects of college than are the better academic groups. However it should be pointed out that Clark and Plotkin did not include black student perceptions of the communication structure per se as part of their "favorable aspects".

A partial explanation could also be that some blacks are in an "asking position" in reference to the University structure while other students are not. Academically high students may be more likely to criticize the University since they may not be receiving any help from it.

This raises the possibility that the University may be concentrating on the blacks who need academic help but ignoring the needs of its other black students. Of course this explanation is speculative but it would seem a particularily fruitful area for future research.

Hypothesis A, which states that females perceive the communication structure as being better than do males, is not supported by the present findings. As Figures 1A and 1B indicate, the curves representing the responses of males and females nearly coincide. There is no immediate explanation for these results but further research may serve to confirm or deny them.

CONCLUSIONS

While realizing the limitations of the present study, the writers believe that its most significant contributions are the use of the responses of a large majority of the University of Maryland's black undergraduates to show that sub-groups of blacks do perceive the communication structure differently. It is recommended that further research focused specifically on the communication structure be conducted. More sophisticated research aimed at ways to improve the student-university communication structure for black students may yield some concrete and practical suggestions for change.

TABLE 1

1969 UNIVERSITY STUDENT CENSUS (USC) QUESTIONS USED AS INDICATORS OF BLACK STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE STUDENT-UNIVERSITY COMMUNICATION STRUCTURE[a]

	Response Alternatives		
	Communication Structure Perceived-as-Good	Communication Structure Perceived-as-Bad	Alternatives Not Pertinent To This Study
#1. To me, the best thing about the University is:	(b) Quality of instruction		(a) Campus atmosphere (c) Student activities available (d) Large size (e) Geographical location (f) My relationship with fellow students (g) Course subject matter (h) The way it is run (i) Other
	(The alternatives for #1 and #2 are identical)		
#2. To me, the worst thing about the University is:		(b) Quality of instruction	
#3. What impact has the Student Course Guide had upon your course selection?	(b) A great deal of impact	(d) Little impact (e) None at all	(a) Have been here less than a semester-does not apply (c) Some impact (f) Other
#4. Does the University have any procedures by which a student can earn course credit by taking an examination rather than taking the course?	(a) Yes, and I know the procedure	(c) Doubt it (d) Don't know (e) Sure the University does not	(b) Yes, but I don't know the procedure (f) Other
#5. Which of the following contributed most to your own development during the past year?	(a) Course work in my major field of interest (e) Course work in general (h) Contacts with faculty members		(b) Extra curricular organization activ. (c) Individ. or independent research (d) Social life (dating, parties, etc.) (f) Friendships made (g) Job experience (i) Other
#6. During the past year I became well acquainted with the following number of University instructors or teachers:	(c) One (f) Four (d) Two (g) Five (e) Three (h) Six or more	(b) None	(a) Was not at the University last year (i) Other

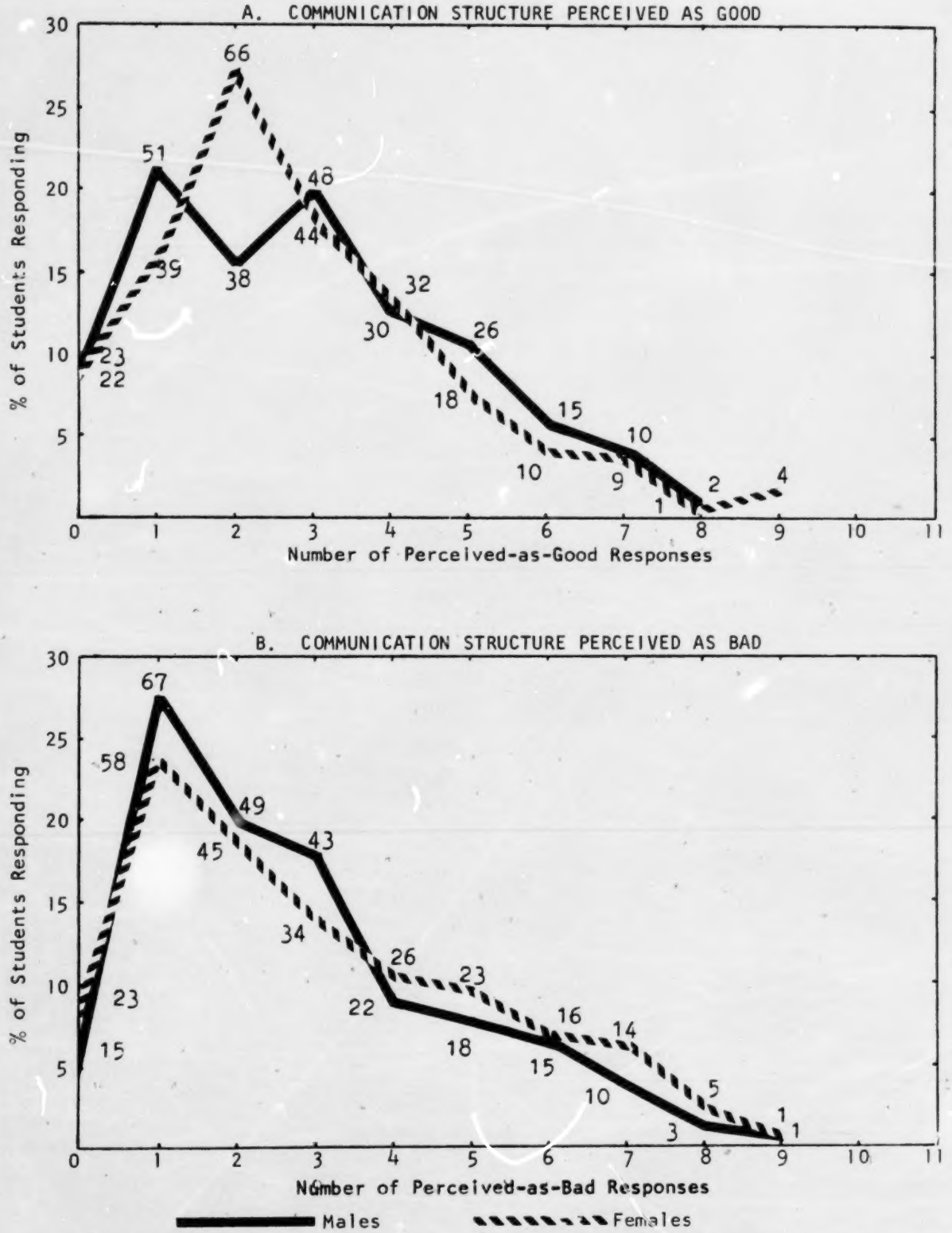
TABLE 1 (Continued)

Communication Structure Perceived-as-Good	Communication Structure Perceived-as-Bad	Alternatives Not Pertinent To This Study
#7. As you expect or recall it, the hardest part of adjusting to college is:	(a) Getting to know faculty members	(b) Being away from home and friends (c) Earning satisfactory grades (d) Getting to know other students (e) Meeting financial expenses (f) Budgeting time (g) Studying efficiently (h) Selecting major field or career (i) Other
#8. Most of my courses are stimulating and exciting.		
(a) Strongly agree	(d) Disagree	(c) Neutral
(b) Agree	(e) Strongly disagree	(f) Other
#9. Most faculty advisors here act like they really care about students.		
(a) Strongly agree	(d) Disagree	(c) Neutral
(b) Agree	(e) Strongly disagree	(f) Other
#10. Most instructors here act like they really care about students.		
(a) Strongly agree	(d) Disagree	(c) Neutral
(b) Agree	(e) Strongly disagree	(f) Other
#11. Most administrators here act like they really care about students.		
(a) Strongly agree	(d) Disagree	(c) Neutral
(b) Agree	(e) Strongly disagree	(f) Other
#12. University students have ample opportunity to participate in University policy making.		
(a) Strongly agree	(d) Disagree	(c) Neutral
(b) Agree	(e) Strongly disagree	(f) Other
#13. Channels for expressing student complaints are readily available.		
(a) Strongly agree	(d) Disagree	(c) Neutral
(b) Agree	(e) Strongly disagree	(f) Other

[a]Each student was allowed to respond to only one alternative per question. Responses to alternatives in the third column were accepted, but not tabulated.

FIGURE 1

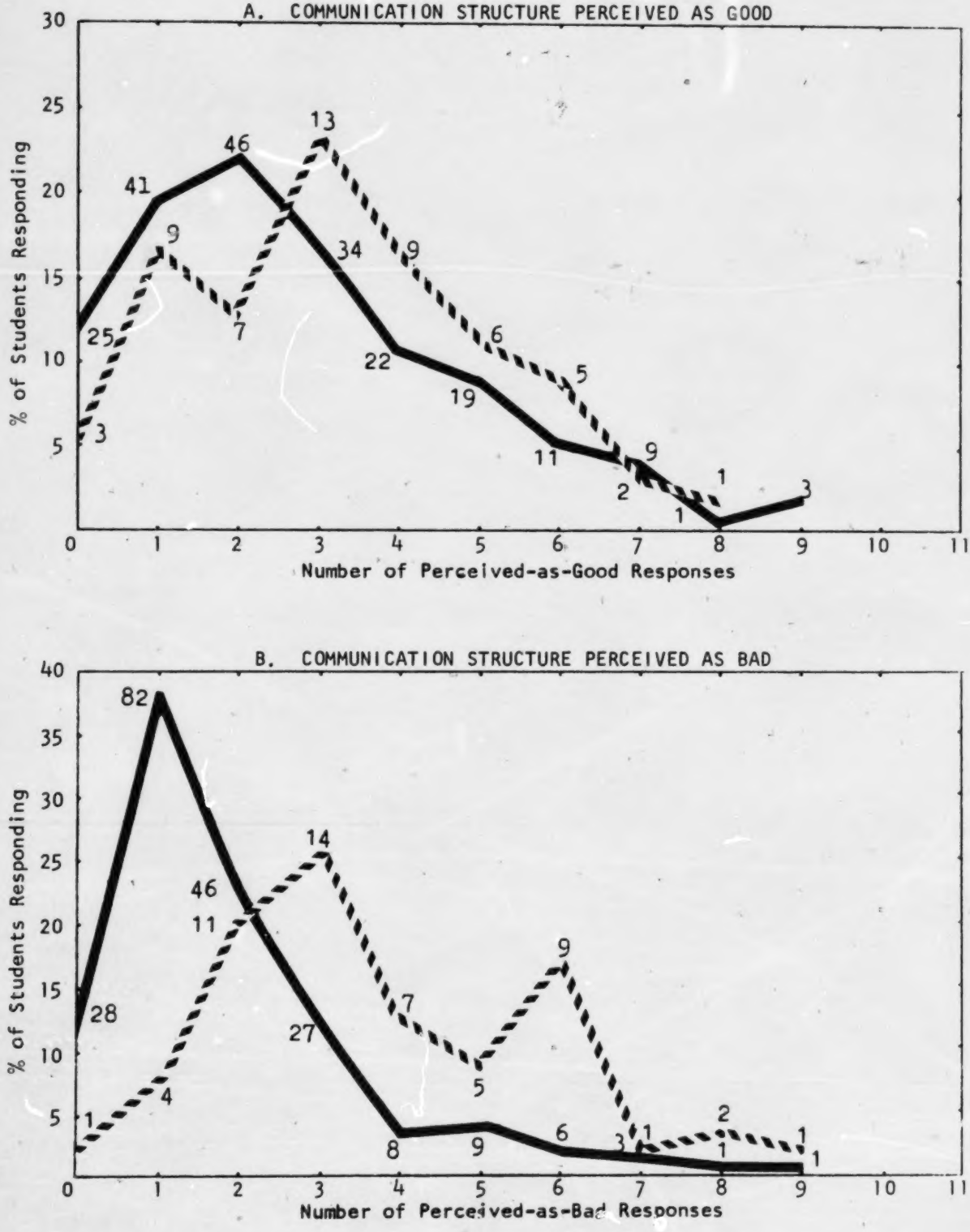
COMPARISON OF MALE AND FEMALE PERCEPTIONS OF THE STUDENT-UNIVERSITY COMMUNICATION STRUCTURE[a]



[a]The numbers on these graphs indicate the number of students represented by each data point.

FIGURE 2

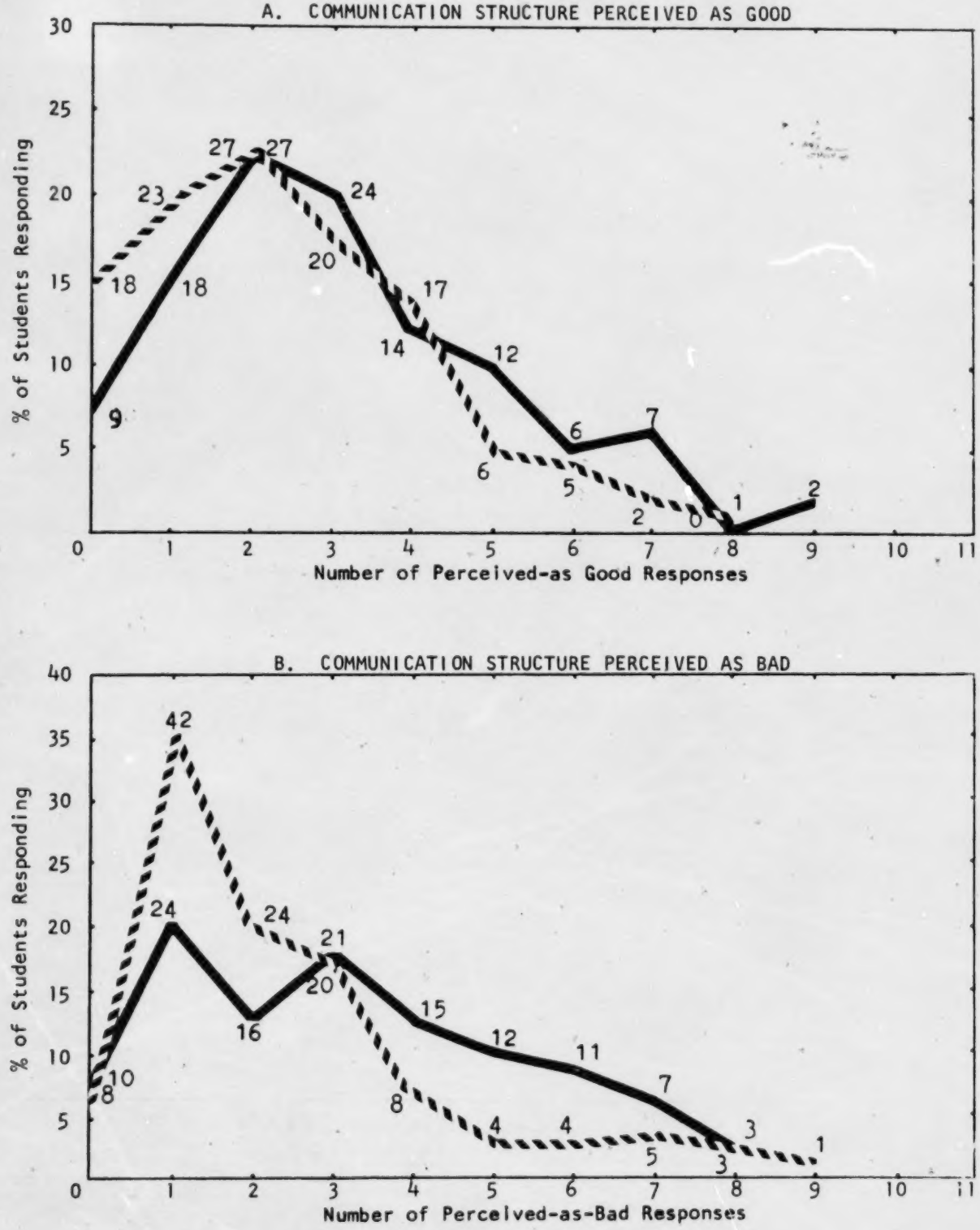
COMPARISON OF FRESHMAN AND SENIOR PERCEPTIONS OF THE STUDENT-UNIVERSITY COMMUNICATION STRUCTURE[a]



[a]The numbers on these graphs indicate the number of students represented by each data point.

FIGURE 3

COMPARISON OF ACADEMICALLY HIGH AND LOW STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE STUDENT-UNIVERSITY COMMUNICATION STRUCTURE[a]


A. COMMUNICATION STRUCTURE PERCEIVED AS GOOD
% of Students Responding
Number of Perceived-as Good Responses
B. COMMUNICATION STRUCTURE PERCEIVED AS BAD
% of Students Responding
Number of Perceived-as-Bad Responses
Academically High
Academically Low

[a]The numbers on these graphs indicate the number of students represented by each data point.